Online customer-to-customer (C2C) incivility: impacts of managerial responses in digital customer service settings

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Abstract

Purpose – This research addressed online customer-to-customer (C2C) incivility during digital service recovery.

Design/methodology/approach – To examine the effectiveness of managerial responses to online C2C incivility post a restaurant service failure, a 2 (Managerial response: general vs specific) x 2 (Failure severity: high vs low) quasi-experimental design was employed. A pretest was conducted with 123 restaurant consumers via Amazon Mechanical Turk, followed by a main study with 174 restaurant consumers. Taking a mixed-method approach, this research first asked open-ended questions to explore how participants perceived the restaurant's motivation for providing a generic versus a specific response. Hayes' (2013) PROCESS procedure was then performed for hypotheses testing.

Findings – The results revealed significant interaction effects of managerial responses and failure severity on perceived online service climate and revisit intention, mediated by trust with managerial responses.

Originality/value – This research yielded unique insight into C2C incivility management literature and industry practices in the context of digital customer service recovery.

Keywords Online incivility, Customer-to-customer interaction, Management response, Digital customer service, Service recovery, Complaining behaviors

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Envision a scenario where you are engaged in a dining experience at a restaurant. Abruptly, your attention is drawn to patrons seated at a neighboring table engaging in loud and discourteous communication with their service provider. This scenario is commonly viewed as a typical instance of customer incivility (Zhan, Guo, Yang, Li, & Li, 2023). Traditional examples of customer incivility in hospitality service settings include mocking, belittling comments and rudeness toward employees (Zhan *et al.*, 2023). The interactive nature of social media has further accelerated the emergence of an adverse online phenomenon – online consumer incivility. Online consumer incivility highlights undesirable and even hostile interactions and behaviors in a virtual environment (Dineva, 2023). Service occurs within a dynamic ecosystem comprising not only service providers but also other customers (Hwang, Hur, Shin, & Kim, 2022). For instance, consumers have been found to often insult, mock, provoke, use profanity, challenge other consumers' statements and harass one another via social media platforms (Breitsohl, Roschk, & Feyertag, 2018). When rude or offensive

comments are directed toward another customer, this phenomenon is often described as online customer-to-customer (C2C) incivility (Bacile, Wolter, Allen, & Xu, 2018).

Previous academic research on customer incivility has predominantly focused on incivility within a customer–employee dyad, as highlighted by Pu, Ji, and Sang (2022). This body of research provides substantial evidence for the adverse effects of customer incivility on various aspects of employees' emotions, attitudes, well-being and behaviors (Zhou, Pindek, & Ray, 2022). Recent review papers by Lages, Perez-Vega, Kadić-Maglajlić, and Borghei-Razavi (2023) and Chaudhuri, Apoorva, Vrontis, Siachou, and Trichina (2023) underscore that literature on customer incivility has primarily concentrated on its detrimental impacts on frontline employees in the service sector, particularly in offline settings. For instance, Baker and Kim (2020) emphasized the importance of management support and co-worker support in preserving employees' psychological well-being, job performance and work quality-of-life when confronted with customer incivility. However, the marketing literature addressing incivility occurring between customers is limited, as noted by Bacile et al. (2018), with few exceptions focusing on offline contexts. Baker and Kim (2019), for example, explored how customers respond to employees in the aftermath of other customers' incivility during a service failure, including expressions of gratitude, loyalty to the employee and intention to tip. Zhan et al. (2023) delved into bystander effects, revealing that fellow customers' incivility can prompt similar actions among focal customers. Drawing attention to the digital realm, Suler (2016) pointed out that online C2C incivility operates under different cultural norms compared to offline contexts, presenting both challenges and opportunities for digital service recovery. Despite this, research addressing the impacts of online C2C incivility on focal customers remains scarce.

In addition, as highlighted by Bacile et al. (2018), a majority of brands tend to disregard C2C incivility, neglecting the potential harm it may inflict on their reputation. While there exists research on the provision of management support for employees facing customer incivility within a customer–employee dyad (e.g. Baker & Kim, 2020), the comprehension of how managerial responses to customer incivility within a customer–customer dyad are associated with customer perceptions and behavioral outcomes remains limited.

To fill these above-discussed research gaps and to advance the existing knowledge concerning managerial responses to online C2C incivility, the current research sets out to examine the impacts of managerial responses to online C2C incivility post a restaurant service failure on the focal complainant's perception and behavioral intention. The effectiveness of firms' responses to online C2C incivility was assessed through the online focal complainant's perception of the online service climate and their intention to revisit the involved restaurant. The application of the concept of perceived service climate to customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions (CCI) has recently emerged, shedding light on how customers evaluate a company's efforts in managing such interactions, as demonstrated by Bacile (2020). The importance of recognizing and leveraging this customer-side evaluation of service recovery as an indirect control mechanism in CCI becomes evident. Therefore, in addition to the well-established behavioral outcome variable in marketing literature, namely revisit intention, this research also incorporates customers' perceived service climate to analyze how a focal complainant responds to various responses by a restaurant when addressing online C2C incivility.

Furthermore, this research considered the mediating role of the focal complainant's trust in explaining the effectiveness of managerial responses to online CCI. Customers' trust has been widely recognized as one of the major concerns for effective management of relationship marketing (Bilgihan & Bujisic, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2021; Steinhoff, Arli, Weaven, & Kozlenkova, 2019). It is an important factor in technology-mediated service environments (Kim, Lim, & Ji, 2022), often discussed in relation to consumer experience and behaviors involving emerging technologies (e.g. Kim, Kim, & Park, 2017). Finally, prior studies suggested that the effectiveness of online managerial responses to online customer

complaints varies with the strategies firms adopt and the magnitude of their impact (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). This research argues that the effectiveness of managerial responses to online CCI could be moderated by the individual's perceived severity of service failure. Taken together, this research aimed to (1) examine the effectiveness of different types of managerial responses to online CCI in affecting focal complainant's perception of service climate and revisit intention; (2) explore the mediating role of trust and (3) test the moderating role of perceived service failure. While the individual variables under study are not novel, the exploration of the complexities among these variables in digital service recovery involving uncivil interactions among consumers is groundbreaking. The novelty arises from the unique context in which these variables are situated – specifically, online CCI following a service failure. This novelty contributes significant theoretical and practical value to the research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Online customer-to-customer incivility

Customer incivility is particularly ubiquitous in the hospitality service settings, such as hotels, restaurants and airlines (Pu *et al.*, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2022). Traditional instances of customer incivility in these settings include mocking, belittling comments and rudeness toward employees (Zhan *et al.*, 2023). As customer incivility has increasingly become a topic of academic interest, the omnipresence and interactive nature of social media has facilitated the emergence of an adverse online phenomenon: *online consumer incivility*. In general, cognitive dissonance theory (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2012) posits that individuals, when confronted with information or opinions conflicting with their existing beliefs, may experience cognitive dissonance, prompting defensive and aggressive responses that contribute to incivility in online interactions. The characteristics of the online environment further amplify this tendency, as indicated by the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) and the deindividuation theory (Diener, Lusk, DeFour, & Flax, 1980). The online disinhibition effect theory suggests that the anonymity provided by online platforms often makes individuals feel less restrained and more liberated in their communication compared to offline interactions. This increased freedom can lead to impulsive expressions and, consequently, uncivil behavior (Suler, 2004). Similarly, deindividuation theory explains that deindividuation occurs when individuals experience a reduced sense of accountability in a group setting. In online spaces, where individuals may be anonymous or part of a large crowd, they may feel less responsible for their actions, contributing to incivility (Diener *et al.*, 1980).

Service occurs within a dynamic ecosystem comprising not only service providers, but also other customers or bystanders (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2018). When rude or offensive comments are directed toward another customer, it is often referred to as C2C incivility (Bacile *et al.*, 2018). These include but are not limited to insulting remarks, interruptions, unfair accusations, flaming, challenging others' statements and verbal attacks. Consumers have been found to often use profanity, provoke, mock and harass one another as well as toward the brand on social media platforms (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2018).

Nevertheless, academic research addressing online incivility is traditionally found in the customer–employee dyad (Cheng, Dong, Zhou, Guo, & Peng, 2020; Pu *et al.*, 2022) or in an offline context (e.g. Zhan *et al.*, 2023). Marketing literature on online C2C incivility is limited (Bacile *et al.*, 2018). One of the limited examples is Bacile (2020) which addressed the phenomenon of online C2C incivility during digital service recovery – a fellow customer's dysfunctional online dialog directed at a complainant. As Bacile (2020) stressed, in today's technology-connected marketplace, digital customer service via social media is increasingly adopted by customers and businesses, which brings about both challenges and opportunities for digital service recovery addressing online C2C incivility.

Customer incivility has been acknowledged to harm service firms, employees (Lee & Kim, 2022) and trigger victims' anger, distress and withdrawal behaviors. Even merely witnessing incivility can cause observers to avoid a brand (Okan & Elmadag, 2020). Online C2C incivility, in particular, can interrupt service recovery efforts and influence observers' perceptions of a brand (Bacile *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, online CCI could damage consumers' perceived service climate on a firm's digital customer service channel, like social media (Bacile, 2020). Nevertheless, many firms overlook the potential harm the incivility may bring to them and often choose not to address such online CCI in digital customer service situations (Bacile *et al.*, 2018). How managerial responses following these situations relate to customer perceptions of a company and what other corresponding outcomes such situations might produce is unknown. Therefore, this research aims to examine whether and how managerial responses to online CCI affects victims' perception and revisit intention.

2.2 Managerial responses to online C2C incivility

A growing number of recent studies have made endeavors to understanding the effectiveness of companies' responses to consumer incivility. Béal, Grégoire, and Carrillat (2023) tackled the phenomenon of companies addressing complainant's incivility on social media. They found that the use of *humor* in managerial responses to uncivil complaints is an effective strategy to increase observers' purchase intentions. As brands or businesses are perceived to take the main responsibility over managing uncivil engagement on their social media pages (Dineva, Breitsohl, Roschk, & Hosseinpour, 2023; Dineva & Breitsohl, 2022), a range of moderation practices *by brands* have been discussed as an effective governance mechanism to manage consumer incivility on social media (e.g. Dineva, 2023; Dineva, Breitsohl, & Garrod, 2017), which vary in their specific types. For instance, *passive* incivility management refers to avoiding the uncivil situations (Hauser, Hautz, Hutter, & Füller, 2017) and observing without getting involved (Homburg, Ehm, & Artz, 2015); whereas *active* incivility management describes moderation practices that actively address the incivility incident.

Digital customer service recovery has gained mounting popularity and public visibility given its potential cost savings and efficiency of handling complaints (Baer, 2016). This thrusts the nuances associated with digital customer service via social media platforms into the research spotlight, such as handling complaints and C2C incivility (Bacile, 2020). Wei, Miao, and Huang (2013) pinpointed that while the majority of hotel managers' responses are accommodating and timely, their responses vary by the extent to which the content is pertinent to a particular review or not. In a similar manner, Wei, Zhang, Rathjens, and McGinley (2022) mentioned the effectiveness of *specific* versus *generic* managerial responses to online restaurant customer reviews of opposite valences. The present research thus examined the effectiveness of managerial responses to online C2C incivility along the generic-specific dichotomy. A specific managerial response represents a response that more thoroughly and particularly addresses the unpleasant interactions on social media platforms, which is customized and unique to that particular issue (Wei *et al.*, 2013, 2022). In contrast, a *generic* managerial response is a standardized response whose content is more general and appears less relevant to the specific situation (Bacile, 2020).

2.3 Research question and hypotheses development

2.3.1 Motivational drivers of managerial responses to online C2C incivility. In recognition of the large volume of consumer reviews on third-party platforms that are ultimately beyond the control of firms, previous studies offered valuable insight into the motivations of firms implementing online complaints management by actively responding to customers' online complaints. These include but are not limited to avoiding unwanted attacks from prospective customers (Homburg & Fürst, 2007), addressing service failures, communicating

trustworthiness and rebuilding a reputable image in the electronic market (Lee & Lee, 2006). Wei *et al.* (2013) found that the motivations underlying hotel managers' responses to online customer complaints could differ by the specificity of the responses. Nevertheless, firms' motivations of responding to online C2C incivility as perceived by the focal complainant are less known, not to mention how they may vary with the specificity of the managerial responses. As such, the following research question is put forward:

RQ. What are the motivational drivers behind restaurants' different management responses (specific vs generic) to online C2C incivility manifested in fellow customer's negative response to a consumer complaint on social media, as perceived by the focal complainant?

2.3.2 Effectiveness of managerial responses to online C2C incivility. In the present research, the effectiveness of managerial responses to online CCI incivility was captured by online focal complainant's *perceived online service climate* and *revisit intention* toward the involved restaurant. Customers' perceived service climate describes the extent to which a service firm prioritizes customer service through organizational practices at service encounters (Jung, Yoo, & Arnold, 2017). Over the past few years, the concept of perceived service climate has been gradually applied to CCI to understand how customers evaluate a company's efforts to managing CCI. Given the unpredictability of how customers may be treated by one another in a service situation (Mayer, Ehrhart, & Schneider, 2009), Bacile (2020) stressed the urgency of recognizing and leveraging this customer-side assessment of service climate as an indirect control mechanism in CCI. As such, in addition to the commonly studied behavioral outcome variable in marketing literature (i.e. revisit intention), the current research adopted customers' perceived service climate to understand how the focal complainant evaluates the different responses taken by a restaurant when addressing problematic CCI in an online setting (i.e. online C2C incivility).

Prior studies suggested that the effectiveness of online managerial responses to online customer complaints varies with the strategies firms adopt and the magnitude of their impact (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). Proactive and timely firm responses were found more effective to avoid unnecessary attacks from other customers (Homburg & Fürst, 2007). Specific managerial responses to negative online reviews were found to generate more trust and deliver higher communication quality as opposed to generic ones (Wei *et al.*, 2013). A transparent recovery strategy to address a complaint signals trust and quality to observers, and further encourages more positive word-of-mouth referrals and purchase intentions (Hogreve, Bilstein, & Hoerner, 2019). On the other hand, if a firm fails to address uncivil comments made by other customers, the unpleasant engagement of virtually present other customers can increase organizational injustice perceptions (Bacile *et al.*, 2018).

2.3.3 Mediator: focal complainant's trust in managerial responses. Customers' trust has been widely recognized as one of the key factors in effective relationship marketing (Bilgihan & Bujisic, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2021; Steinhoff *et al.*, 2019). It is especially important in technology-mediated service environments (Kim *et al.*, 2022), and often discussed in relation to consumer experience and behaviors involving emerging technologies (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2017). Trust often refers to the belief or confidence that individuals have in someone or something (Liu, Shahab, & Hoque, 2022). In an online setting, trust describes "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). This research sets out to examine the potential mediating role of the focal complainant's trust in the managerial response to online C2C incivility.

The extant literature offered empirical support for a positive impact of trust. For instance, Wei et al. (2013) revealed that specific managerial responses to online negative reviews generated greater consumer trust as opposed to generic ones. A service provider providing a complainant with a transparent recovery sends out signals of trust to watchful observers (Hogreve et al., 2019). In the context of this study, as specific response addresses particular issues revealed in the complaint and provide relevant information about the C2C incivility, such customized responses can serve as a signal of firms' efforts and attitudes for consumers to develop a greater level of trust in the managerial response, which further helps the focal complainant to regain confidence to go back as giving the firm a second chance. On the contrary, as generic responses fail to address the specific issues raised in the C2C incivility, such standardized and generic content may weaken the focal complainant's trust in the managerial response and further dampens their perceived effectiveness of restaurants' managerial response.

The construct of trust is also found influential in promoting satisfaction and behavioral intention. In the employee–manager relationship, Gill (2008) revealed a positive and significant relationship between trust and satisfaction within hospitality. Besides, trust is a critical indicator of an individual's attitude and adoption intention toward new technologies (Giorgi et al., 2022; Tussyadiah, Zach, & Wang, 2020). For example, Aslam, Khan, Arif, and Zaman (2022) found that trust directly led to the acceptance of chatbots. In the digital consumer service context, the present research proposed that the focal complainant's trust in managerial responses to online C2C incivility provides signals of their confidence in the firm to perform properly in the service encounter, which can subsequently improve the complainant's perceived service climate and revisit intention toward the involved restaurant. Taken together, specific managerial responses to online C2C incivility, as opposed to generic ones, would generate more trust in the managerial responses for the focal complainer, which can subsequently improve the perceived service climate and revisit intention of the focal complaint.

2.3.4 Moderator: perceived service failure severity. Prior studies suggested that the effectiveness of online managerial responses to online customer complaints varies with not only the strategies firms adopt, but also the magnitude of the impact (Van Doorn et al., 2010). The present study incorporated the individual perception of the failure severity as a potential moderator in its examination of the effects of managerial response to C2C incivility. As the importance one attaches to the same incident could vary with individuals, this paper proposed that the above-discussed effects are moderated by the individual's perceived severity of service failure.

Individuals perceiving a high level of failure severity will respond to specific (vs generic) managerial responses more positively whereas individuals perceiving a low level of failure severity will exhibit similar levels of perceived service climate and revisit intentions regardless of the managerial response type. This is because the effectiveness of managerial response efforts only work to some extent, as their effectiveness will be overridden by the perceived severity of the issue itself, which is further intensified in the context of C2C incivility. That means, when the perceived severity of the issue is high, an individual tends to be less motivated to make cognitive efforts to engage in further evaluation of the restaurant's response. Customers' perceived service climate and revisit intention toward the restaurant is, therefore, not likely to differ by the type of management responses (generic vs specific). The effectiveness of managerial response would be diminished. When the perceived severity of the service failure is low, the focal complainant may not expect the restaurant's involvement on a third-party user-generated platform, especially in response to another consumer's posting. When the focal complainant is exposed to such unexpected involvement, he/she is more likely to further engage with the response and thus different types of restaurant's responses may result in different perceptions and behavioral intentions. As such, when the

perceived severity of the service failure is low, the effectiveness of managerial response in improving the perceived service climate and revisit intention would be greater through a heightened or weakened trust. The heightened/weakened trust in the managerial response helps to explain how different types of managerial responses in digital customer service can lead to different consumer perceptions and responses.

Taken together, the following hypotheses are put forward:

H1. When perceived failure severity is low, consumers will have a stronger positive reaction toward the restaurant (a. perceived online service climate, b. revisit intention) when managerial response is specific (vs generic).

H2. When perceived failure severity is high, consumers' (a) perceived online service climate and (b) revisit intention toward the restaurant does not differ by the type of managerial responses (generic vs specific).

H3. Trust with the response mediates the interaction effect between managerial response type and perceived severity on (a) perceived online service climate and (b) revisit intention toward the restaurant.

The conceptual framework of the present study is presented in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and experimental stimuli

A 2 (Managerial response: general vs specific) x 2 (Perceived failure severity: high vs low) quasi-experimental design was employed with managerial response being experimentally manipulated and perceived service failure severity measured as a continuous variable. A restaurant take-out service failure situation was used owing to (1) the prevalence of take-out service under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) the frequency of service failures in the restaurant industry (Bacile, 2020; Wei *et al.*, 2022). Participants were first presented with a textual description of a failure incident at a made-up restaurant ("ABC" restaurant) and instructed to imagine they just went through it themselves. Participants were then provided with a complaint they posted on Yelp, hypothetically. The complaint intentionally affixed "You" in the area where the complainant's name appeared, in order to increase the participants' sense of actually being in the described scenario (Bacile, 2020). Below the posted complaint, an uncivil response from a stranger Alex (a gender-neutral name to avoid potential gender bias) was presented, which mocked and insulted the complainant.
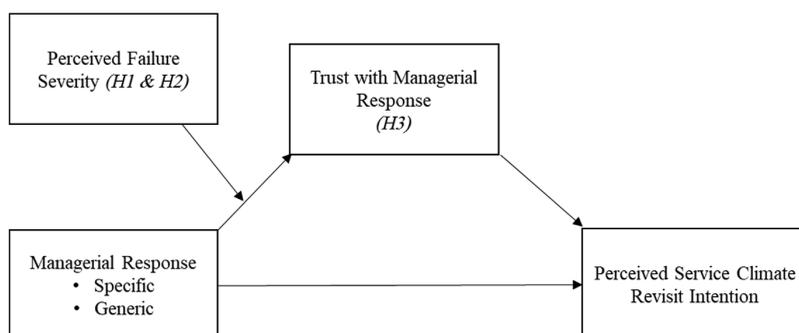
Source(s): The author

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

The text used in Alex's response was adapted from Bacile (2020) and Wei *et al.* (2022), which was developed from actual complaint responses often observed in social media postings.

The second response was from ABC restaurant. All participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (Appendix). In the *generic* condition, the response was rather brief and general, which merely addressed the complainant and his or her service failure without handling the specific situation (adapted from Bacile, 2020), which is commonly seen on social media. In the specific condition, a more thorough and detailed response (adapted from Wei *et al.*, 2013) was presented. Each response was time-stamped to stress that the response from the ABC restaurant was posted after customer Alex's posting.

3.2 Measurements
Following the scenario, participants were asked to answer two questions for realism check (Zhang, Wei, Line, & McGinley, 2021) to ensure the scenario was understood as intended. Participants were then presented with manipulation check questions. For the qualitative component of the research, given the absence of established scales to reliably measure the motivations behind different management responses (specific vs generic) to online C2C incivility, an unstructured approach with one open-ended question (e.g. Li & Stepchenkova, 2012; Wei *et al.*, 2013) was embedded in the survey instrument to elicit participants' responses to the motivational drivers of management responses (i.e. "In your opinion, why did the restaurant post this response?"). The qualitative data were later analyzed to address the research question related to the motivational aspects of different management responses.

For the quantitative component of the research, all items for the constructs of interest were adopted from the original scales and measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). In instances where applicable, the study context (i.e. ABC restaurant) was specifically mentioned in the items to align with the scenario (e.g. "If I could, I would come to ABC restaurant again."). The mediator, consumers' trust with the managerial response, was captured via four items adapted from Hui, Zhao, Fan, and Au (2004) (e.g. "The online response provided by ABC restaurant is trustful." Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.773$). Perceived service failure severity was measured via three items adapted from Wei, Miao, Cai, and Adler (2012) ("Minor problem – major problem", "small inconvenience – big inconvenience" and "minor aggravation – major aggravation" Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.770$). Customers' perceived online service climate was measured via five items adapted from Jung *et al.* (2017) (e.g. "Employees responding on this social media channel have the skills to deliver superior customer service." Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.735$). Revisit intention was measured via three items adopted from Wei *et al.* (2022) (e.g. "If I could, I would come to ABC restaurant again." Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.835$). Finally, demographics information was collected. In addition, two attention check questions (e.g. "Please select Strong Agree") were randomly placed in the survey.

3.3 Sample and data analysis
Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was used to distribute questionnaires. The crowdsourcing platform of MTurk has been well recognized for providing reliable and valid data, representing users with considerable demographic diversity (Kees, Berry, Burton, & Sheehan, 2017). This choice could further contribute to reducing potential sampling biases (Buhrmester, Talaifar, & Gosling, 2018). A pretest was conducted with 123 restaurant consumers via Amazon Mechanical Turk to examine the effectiveness of the manipulation of managerial responses as well as the readability of the questionnaire items. Minor edits were made to the experimental stimuli to improve the clarity. The main study recruited 174 restaurant consumers from Amazon Mechanical Turk who have met all four screening criteria: (1) at least 18 years old; (2) have used social media platforms such as Yelp;

(3) have written online reviews; and (4) have had used take-out service from a restaurant in the past six months. After removing nine responses that failed the attention check questions, the final sample consisted of 165 valid responses. A total of 60% of the participants were male. The majority were between 18 and 40 years old (81.2%), married (83%), Caucasian (61.2%), had a household income of $50,001–100,000 (52.7%) and a bachelor's degree (67.3%) (see Table 1).

Hayes' (2013) PROCESS procedure (model 1) was performed to test H1 and H2 with the type of managerial response as and the perceived failure severity as independent variables. Online service climate and revisit intention were modeled as dependent variables. Then, H3 concerning the mediating effect of trust with managerial response was examined by performing Hayes' (2013) PROCESS procedure (Model 14) with the recommended bias-corrected bootstrapping technique (number of bootstrap samples = 5000). Descriptive analysis was conducted for demographic variables.

4. Results

4.1 Manipulation and realism checks

Two manipulation check questions were employed to check the manipulation of managerial response type: "I find the restaurant's response generic" and "I find the restaurant's response specific" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). ANOVA results indicated that participants in the generic response condition did perceive the response as significantly more generic than those in the specific response condition (MgenericResponse = 5.66; MspecificResponse = 5.34; $p < 0.05$). On the contrary, participants in the *specific response* condition did perceive the response as significantly more specific than those in the *generic*

Characteristics		%
Gender	Male	60.0
	Female	40.0
Ethnic background	Caucasian, Non-Hispanic	61.2
	African American	11.5
	Asian	11.5
	Native American	9.1
	Hispanic	5.5
	Other	1.2
Marital status	Single	17.0
	Married	83.0
Income	Less than $20,000	5.5
	$20,000 to $50,000	35.2
	$50,001 to $100,000	52.7
	$100,000 or more	6.7
Education	High school or less	0.6
	College or Associate degree	4.2
	Bachelor's degree	67.3
	Master's degree	26.7
	Doctoral degree	1.2
Age	18–25	22.4
	26–40	58.8
	41–60	17.0
	Above 60 years old	1.8
Source(s): The author		

Table 1.
Participants
profile ($n = 165$)

response condition (MspecificResponse = 5.69; MgenericResponse = 5.33; $p < 0.05$). Thus, the manipulation of management response type was successful.

In terms of scenario realism, participants in both experimental conditions perceived the scenario as realistic (MgenericResponse = 5.64; MspecificResponse = 5.60) on a seven-point scale, and the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.10$); thus, it was not likely to have any materialized effect on the results.

Finally, to check if participants indeed perceived customer Alex's response as an uncivil interaction, four questions adapted from Reynolds and Harris (2009) were asked (e.g. "The fellow consumer Alex conducted him-/herself in a manner that I do not find appropriate.") Participants in both experimental conditions perceived the action of Alex in the scenario as inappropriate (MgenericResponse's >=5.30; MspecificResponse's> = 5.26) on a seven-point scale, and the difference was not statistically significant (p's > 0.10).

4.2 Motivational drivers of restaurants' different managerial responses to online C2C incivility

Textual data were first analyzed to explore how the focal complainant perceived the restaurant's motivation for providing a response to the online dialogue. Three major motivational drivers were identified. The primary motivational driver is *digital service recovery*. By providing responses to the online customer dialogue, participants believed the restaurant was trying to acknowledge the issue, offer an apology, resolve the problem and promise for an improved future situation.

> It was a proper way of apologizing to the customer since he had received an over cooked food in his order.

> Well, they might regret for poor service provided by the customer, so they respond to rectify their errors in the future.

Participants also indicated that the restaurant's response is one behavioral manifestation of their *online image management strategies*. By responding to the online customer dialogue, the restaurant hoped to regain a reputable image in the online environment and to show potential customers they cared about customers' negative consumption experience.

> They were trying to clean their image for other customers who will see the complaint post.

> They wanted to look like they care.

The third motivational driver is customer relationship management. The restaurant was perceived to attempt to maintain a sustained relationship with their current customers by proactively responding to negative comments.

> To rectify the mistake and to make best customer relationship and to maintain quality of service

> In my opinion the restaurant does not want to create itself a black mark among customers because they are losing customers. So, the Restaurant posted this response immediately.

The present study also identified some interesting differences between the two types of responses in terms of *the perceived level of trust*. Participants indicated that the generic response was less trustworthy as they suspected that such a response could be a default and insincere response that was provided for any negative feedback.

> In my opinion restaurant posted this response in default.

> The restaurant likely posts the same response to any negative feedback because it is a public channel and they want to appear like they care. They don't care about making this right, they only want to appear that way to other customers.

In contrast, several participants reported that by providing a specific response to the online customer dialogue, the restaurant was truly apologetic, wanted to make improvements and further supported the atmosphere in the restaurant.

. . ..customers are using social media as their prime source. Based on customer feedback, the restaurant acknowledged it and thanked them on the social channel.

. . .. engaging with your audience is a great idea. . ..It can make a better customer experience.

to improve the product, to reduce errors on to-go orders and to support the atmosphere in ABC restaurant.

Another unique finding is that, some participants took the restaurant's generic response "with a grain of salt". Specifically, they suggested given that the uncivil interaction took place between two customers, the restaurant may be trying to avoid tackling this sensitive moment directly in a public platform.

I believe the restaurant wants to resolve the situation privately, rather than providing a friendlier response without resorting to a private chat.

To have me [complainant] talk to them in private so others can't see what we are saying.

On the other hand, participants only associated the restaurant's motivation to offer a specific response with their perception of Alex's posting, which was often described as bad, rude and not very fair.

Because this [Alex's posting] is a very rude reply.

Because Alex was rude.

4.3 Hypotheses testing

Hayes' (2013) PROCESS procedure (Model 1) was performed with the recommended bias-corrected bootstrapping technique (Number of bootstrap samples = 5000) to test the hypotheses, with the perceived online service climate and revisit intention as dependent variables. Results indicated that the interaction effects of the types of managerial response and the level of perceived failure severity were significant on online service climate (Table 2; $F(3, 161) = 11.44$, $p < 0.001$) and revisit intention (Table 3; $F(3, 161) = 7.66$, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, people who perceived a lower level of service failure severity reported a higher level of online service climate and revisit intention in the condition of specific response (vs generic response). People who perceived a higher level of service failure severity exhibited a

Outcome variable: perceived service climate						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.4192	0.1757	0.5703	11.4410	3.0000	161.0000	0.0000
Model						
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	13.6677	0.9274	14.7383	0.0000	11.8363	15.4990
Response	1.5404	0.5908	2.6074	0.0100	0.3737	2.7071
FaiSeve	0.6478	0.1647	3.9325	0.0001	0.3225	0.9731
Int_1	−0.2509	0.1058	−2.3717	0.0189	−0.4599	−0.0420

Source(s): The author

Table 2.
The interaction effect of managerial response and perceived failure severity on perceived service climate

similar level on both dependent variables regardless of the managerial response conditions. As such, H1 and 2 were supported.

Further, the mediating effect of trust with managerial response was examined. Hayes' (2013) PROCESS procedure (Model 14) was performed with the recommended bias-corrected bootstrapping technique (number of bootstrap samples = 5000). The results indicated that trust with managerial response mediated the effect of managerial response and perceived failure severity on online service climate (b = 1.276; 95% bootstrap CI = [0.9056, 1.6454]) and revisit intention (b = 1.604; 95% bootstrap CI = [1.0336, 2.1736]). Thus, H3 was supported.

5. Discussions and implications

5.1 Conclusions

This research recognized the significance of online C2C incivility in today's business world. It further examined the effectiveness of different managerial responses in turning around the focal complainant after being attacked by another online customer in a restaurant digital service failure context. The findings of a quasi-experimental design revealed that, the focal complainant's trust in managerial response significantly mediated the impact of managerial response type on his/her perceived service climate as well as revisit intention. Specifically, a specific managerial response that is more detailed, thorough and particularly addressed the unpleasant situation generated more positive outcomes than a generic one. However, such relationships were only significant when the perceived service failure severity was low. When the perceived service failure severity was high, the different effectiveness between a specific managerial response versus a generic one disappeared.

5.2 Theoretical implications

The present research addressed a unique phenomenon of consumer incivility: online C2C incivility in the context of digital customer service recovery. Specifically, the unique phenomenon this research tackled reflected an interesting triadic relationship in an online setting: the restaurant that caused the service failure in an offline setting, the focal complainant who complained on social media as well as customer B who was a virtually present stranger and responded to the focal complainant in a rude manner. The findings of this research yielded unique and insightful implications for theory development in a number of aspects.

Firstly, the present research contributes significantly to consumer incivility literature. Different from the traditional consumer incivility literature that commonly addresses uncivil behaviors toward employees (Boukis, Koritos, Papastathopoulos, & Buhalis, 2023; Cheng *et al.*,

Outcome variable: revisit intention						
R	*R*-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	*p*
0.3535	0.1250	1.2940	7.6646	3.0000	161.0000	0.0001
Model						
	coeff	se	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
constant	0.5960	1.3969	0.4266	0.6702	−2.1626	3.3545
Response	1.9461	0.8899	2.1869	0.0302	0.1887	3.7034
FaiSeve	0.8136	0.2481	3.2789	0.0013	0.3236	1.3035
Int_1	−0.3205	0.1594	−2.0108	0.0460	−0.6352	−0.0057

Source(s): The author

Table 3.
The interaction effect of managerial response and perceived failure severity on revisit intention

2020; Pu *et al.*, 2022) or other consumers (e.g. Li, Zhan, Cheng, & Scott, 2021; Zhan *et al.*, 2023) in an offline, in-person service encounter, this research tackled a unique context that is C2C incivility in an online environment. As Bacile (2020) pinpointed, in today's technology-connected marketplace, digital customer service on social media is increasingly adopted by customers and businesses. As an online sociocultural shift often features the rudeness and disrespect of some individuals through online interactions, customer incivility arises as a highly pertinent aspect of digital customer service (Bacile, 2020; Su *et al.*, 2018). The present research extended the scope of consumer incivility literature and noted the significance of better understanding consumer incivility in digital service settings, a distinct emerging form of incivility in a consumerism context. Further, while some research has begun to examine the reactions of bystanders to various online incivility interactions (e.g. Benkenstein & Rummelhagen, 2020; Gursoy, Cai, & Anaya, 2017; Sharma, Jain, & Behl, 2020), the present research addressed the impact of online C2C incivility on the focal customer.

Secondly, by examining online C2C incivility following a service failure, this research offers distinctive insights into the literature on C2C incivility management within the unique context of digital customer service recovery. In the realm of service breakdowns, a noteworthy aspect emerges where, in line with the frustration-aggression hypothesis theory (Dollard *et al.*, 2013), frustration has the potential to manifest as aggressive conduct. Instances of service failures can trigger frustration among online consumers, heightening the openness and susceptibility of their grievances to uncivil responses from other online customers who act as observers. In other words, the uncivil engagement exhibited by the online observer can compound the intricacy of the service failure incident. This underscores the necessity for the company's intervention not only to address the initial failure but also to manage the unfavorable CCI. Prior research tackled managerial engagement in dealing with general incivility behaviors, such as asserting (i.e. disagreeing with the aggressor), pacifying (i.e. requesting a change in behavior) and censoring content (Dineva, Breitsohl, Garrod, & Megicks, 2020; Matzat & Rooks, 2014). A few research studies has begun to understand the impacts of firms' management responses to user-generated hotel reviews (Wei *et al.*, 2013) or to social media complaints (Johnen & Schnittka, 2019). Johnen and Schnittka (2019) stressed that management response to social media complaints depends on the context and the service provider's communication style. In contrast, similar research efforts are less visible for firms' engagement in addressing other consumers' incivility toward a consumer in an online environment post a service failure caused by the firm. The effectiveness of different response strategies in the context of a fellow customer's online uncivil comment directed at a complainant post a negative service experience is not examined. As the on-stage, publicly viewable customer service dialog represents the transparent nature of social media service management (Bacile, 2020), the present research advanced service management literature by revealing how and/or if a firm should address problematic CCI to safeguard the focal complainant's perception of and attitude toward a digital service recovery encounter. Customer incivility management depends on a party that provides the trust necessary to arbitrate between aggrieved parties (Gillespie, 2017). Within this incivility management perspective, the present research offered empirical support that the focal complainant's trust in a managerial response significantly and positively mediated the impacts of the managerial response on focal complainant's reactions.

Thirdly, this research incorporated a critical factor in service literature (Bowen & Schneider, 2014), perceived service climate. Service climate has been traditionally defined and studied as employee perceptions of the organizational policies and practices that were made available for them to pursue service excellence (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998), directly or indirectly leading to customer loyalty and customer satisfaction (Hong, Liao, Hu, & Jiang, 2013). Service climate research adopting a consumer perspective has only become available in recent years, with most done in face-to-face situations (Bacile, 2020) and

addressing only customer perceptions of service climate in enjoyable service encounters (Jung *et al.*, 2017). As one exception, Benkenstein and Rummelhagen (2020) pinpointed the significance of effectively managing customer misbehavior to maintain a positive service environment. The present research extended this line of research by linking customer incivility management to consumers' perception of firms' service climate in a digital service setting, further advancing service climate literature.

Furthermore, the present research selected a third party user-generated social media platform, rather than a platform that is more under the direct control of a firm such as their official websites or official social media channels. The proliferation of interactive marketing has facilitated an exponential growth in the popularity of using social media channels for online communications, due to the easy access via personal mobile devices, the decreased social pressure (Bacile, Ye, & Swilley, 2014) and the hyper-interactivity and multi-user dialog via social media platforms (Izogo & Mpinganjira, 2020; Su *et al.*, 2018). It is especially true when it comes to complaining behavior. Such digital customer service recovery via social media is recognized as a new form of digital service which demonstrates the expansion of digital service products in today's technology-connected marketplace (Bacile, 2020). The emergence of incivility among customers via social media has been referred to as an increasingly prevalent dark side of social media networks, yet less well understood (Dineva, 2023). The present research pointed out the need to provide a holistic account of online C2C incivility management on social media in order to advance interactive marketing research and practices. Future research opportunities are thus abundant for interactive marketing researchers.

5.3 Practical implications

Given the prevalent problem of online C2C incivility in the contemporary business landscape, this research provides timely and valuable suggestions for industry practitioners across various aspects.

First and foremost, the findings shed light on both the *strategies* and *actors* for managing C2C incivility on social media platforms. Consumer incivility management will expect both hospitality firms and social media platforms to adopt and implement more proactive moderation practices. On the one hand, managers in charge of social media platforms should not only be sensitive to comments mentioning the company-related words, but also other consumers' comments toward each other. Nevertheless, firms often overlook or choose not to address online C2C incivility occurring in digital customer service situations (Bacile *et al.*, 2018). It is only in the recent years when firms and frontline employees have been called upon to curb C2C misbehavior contagion through appropriate interventions (Danatzis & Möller-Herm, 2023). For instance, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has tips to help companies comply with the law. The Consumer Review Fairness Act (CRFA) specifically protects people's ability to share their honest opinions. In the hospitality industry, Southwest Airlines has a "no jerks" policy, which means that they do not tolerate uncivil behavior from customers. They have also implemented a "quiet flight" program, which encourages passengers to be considerate of others and avoid loud or disruptive behavior (Mankin, 2023). Hilton Hotels and Resorts also has a "zero tolerance" policy for abusive or threatening behavior from guests, and encourages guests to be mindful of others and avoid loud or disruptive behavior during certain hours (Indeed, October 20, 2023). In contrast, similar efforts to regulate online forums are lagging. Ensuring compliance with the Consumer Review Fairness Act in online managerial interactions will require particular attention. More hospitality firms should adopt policies akin to Southwest Airlines' "no jerks" policy and Hilton Hotels' "zero tolerance" policy, tailoring them to address CCI on their online platforms. This could include specific guidelines for online behavior and clear consequences for violations.

Businesses must be prepared to act upon online C2C incivility in a timely and sincere manner. Managers should not regard such interactions as irrelevant or not worthy of their intervention. The present study examined the effectiveness of different managerial responses in turning around the focal complainant after being attacked by another online customer in a restaurant service failure context. A specific managerial response that is more detailed, thorough and particularly addressed the unpleasant CCI generated more positive outcomes than a generic one. These results indicate that lacking a sincere approach to online C2C incivility could result in consumers' decreased perception of the digital service climate and reduce their future revisit intention. Hospitality service providers are thus encouraged to treat online C2C incivility more seriously and carefully through an effortful approach, where they proactively provide a detailed and thorough response. Firms can moderate their online platforms to ensure that customers are engaged in respectful and civil discourse. One example is to implement a robust monitoring system on social media platforms that includes both human moderators and AI tools to detect and address C2C incivility promptly, ensuring that all interactions are respectful and civil. Firms can educate their customers on the importance of respectful communication and provide guidelines for appropriate online behavior. This can include creating a code of conduct for online interactions and providing training on how to communicate effectively and respectfully. Firms can also use technology to help identify and address uncivil behavior online. This could include using algorithms to detect inappropriate language or behavior, and using chatbots to intervene and redirect conversations that are becoming uncivil.

Further, the findings recommended the firm to consider the severity of the situation: The effectiveness of a specific managerial response versus a generic one depends on the perceived service failure severity. If the perceived service failure severity was low, a specific managerial response can generate more positive outcomes than a generic one. However, when the perceived service failure severity was high, the different effectiveness between a specific managerial response versus a generic one disappeared. This indicates the necessity of developing a tiered response system for handling online C2C incivility, where the severity of the service failure dictates the level of detail and personalization in the managerial response. For a serious service failure, the firm may want to prioritize addressing the unpleasant situation that led to the complaint before they handle the online C2C incivility. This can also help to show that the firm takes the complaint seriously and is committed to resolving the original issue.

The present research further implied that social media platforms can be a helpful vehicle to moderate C2C incivility. Social media platforms should be proactive to regulate and minimize the potential factors that facilitate uncivil CCI and behaviors. A recent example can be seen in Spotify that introduced new guidelines on automatic and proactive management that prevents the dissemination of misinformation. In addition, the fast advancement of artificial intelligence and big data analytics equips social media platforms to more proactively identify and screen out uncivil exchanges. Social media platforms should implement advanced AI-driven moderation tools to automatically detect and filter out uncivil comments, supplemented by easy-to-use reporting mechanisms for users to flag inappropriate behavior.

Finally, trust was found as a powerful mechanism in consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions during digital service recovery situations. The findings revealed that the focal complainant's trust in a firm's management of online C2C incivility plays a critical role in how the focal complainant evaluates the firm's digital service climate and whether he/she returns or not in the future. As such, this paper recommends hospitality companies to compile and distribute a standardized checklist of behaviors for frontline employees to use when responding to online C2C incivility, ensuring all responses are consistent, sincere and effective. This can help to build trust and confidence in the complainant and help to de-escalate the unpleasant C2C situation.

5.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The present research is not without limitations. First, given the sensitivity of management involvement in addressing C2C incivility in an online setting, this research experimentally manipulated only two types of managerial response based on its level of specificity. Future research interested in delving deeper into this topic is recommended to explore more response strategies to better inform both academia and industry of proper managerial interventions. Second, this research selected a third-party social media platform to examine consumers' responses to managerial involvement in C2C incivility. Future research addressing similar niche phenomenon surrounding digital customer service recovery can compare the differences between a company-controlled social media platform and a third-party social media platform that is beyond the direct control of firms. Third, provided the quasi-experimental research design, this research is limited to including only one typical type of uncivil customer response. Future studies can consider examining more diverse responses from other customers that are virtually present in order to provide a more holistic picture of the prevalent online C2C incivility phenomenon. Finally, alternative data sources should be considered for reaching a more generalizable population to establish the robustness of the study findings.

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Appendix
Experimental stimuli

Scenario:

Please read the scenario on the next page very carefully and imagine it has happened to you.
Later you will be asked to answer some questions based on the scenario. Please spend at least 15s on reading the scenario, at which point you will be able to move on to the questions.

You recently placed a to-go order from ABC Restaurant, and you were not too happy about the experience. So you decided to post a review on *Yelp* about this experience, as shown on the next page.
[Your first name] > ABC restaurant.

I placed a to-go order for dinner yesterday evening. Not happy. I was not given everything in my carry-out order, but did not discover it until I arrived home. Plus, some of the food was overcooked. The worker was not helpful when I called to complain and insinuated that I was lying. I want to know how I can get this issue fixed and resolved?

After you posted the review, you noticed that there was a response from other customers as well. Below the fellow customer Alex's response, you also saw a response from ABC restaurant:

Generic response
Alex: LMFAO! This is your fault for not checking your order at the restaurant. GET A BRAIN DUMMY! Your post here makes you look stupid, so don't try to blame the company. Try to think this through next time before showing us all how dumb you are.

   ABC Restaurant: We're sorry for the mistakes in your order, [your first name]. Please contact our team to let us get more details: service@abc.com.

Specific response
Alex: LMFAO! This is your fault for not checking your order at the restaurant. GET A BRAIN DUMMY! Your post here makes you look stupid, so don't try to blame the company. Try to think this through next time before showing us all how dumb you are.

   ABC Restaurant: [Your first name], thank you for making us your restaurant of choice when you recently visited here. Your comments are important to us. *We will also do our best to cultivate a supportive atmosphere.* We are sorry that the take-out experience you received was not so positive. Providing excellent product and service is our promise to our guests and please allow me to extend my sincere apologies. We are looking at ways to improve the product so to reduce errors on to-go orders. Please contact our team to let us get more details and make it up for you: service@abc.com.

About the author

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